DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 995 UD 027 529

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TITLE Urban Principals: A Critical Perspective on the Context of Minority Student Outcomes.
PUB DATE May 90
NOTE 50p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Attitudes; Dropout Prevention; Educational Environment; High Risk Students; Influences; Interviews; *Minority Group Children; *Outcomes of Education; *Potential Dropouts; *Principals; Secondary Education; State Surveys; Student Attitudes; Urban Education; *Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

The study explores how urban school principals perceive the problem of and solutions to student dropouts, and how these perceptions relate to student outcomes. Using the model of Bossert and his colleagues as a preliminary framework, the study analyzes principal interviews and demographic and questionnaire data. In addition, student outcome data focus on student attitudes and student achievement. Schools in the following areas are studied: (1) Chicago (Illinois); (2) Miami (Florida); (3) Newark (New Jersey); (4) San Antonio (Texas); and (5) Milwaukee (Wisconsin). The findings for each of eight schools are presented separately, and then findings are discussed based on a cross-site analysis. Findings indicate that the context of issues mitigating against student retention range from within the school to placing blame on the student, family, and community. However, the attitudes and achievement levels of students seem to be unrelated to how the principal perceives the context of the student dropout problem. All the principals cite programs and strategies related specifically to school climate, and yet none of them addresses the issue of racial prejudice. None of the principals considers the cultural relevance of the curriculum when they place the context of the dropout problem within the school. The findings of this study imply that if principals care about the educational success of racially diverse students, they must begin to dismantle the unequal power relations inherent in the interactions within the school and with the community. Two figures are included, along with a list of 42 references. (JS)

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Urban Principals: A critical perspective on the context of minority student outcomes

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May 1990

UD 027 529

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Abstract

This study explores how urban school principals perceive the problem of and solutions to student dropouts, and how these perceptions relate to student outcomes, in eight, racially diverse schools. Using the model of Bossert and his colleagues as a preliminary framework, we analyzed principal interviews and demographic and questionnaire data. The findings suggest that from one perspective, the perceived contexts of dropout problems and solutions may not influence student outcomes. However, from a critical perspective, principal perceptions and accompanying silence or actions may perpetuate relationships which are not conducive to positive student outcomes.

Urban Principals: A critical perspective on the context of minority student outcomes

This study examines how urban school principals perceive the problem of and solutions to student dropouts in schools populated predominantly with minority students. Specifically, we analyze how principals define the problems and solutions affecting student commitment to stay in school. We also analyze the relationship between principals' perceptions of the reasons and solutions for dropping out and student achievement and students' attitudes toward school. We use as analytical units the principals' references to the school, community, and the student as the sources of and solutions to student dropout.

Student dropout has been conceptualized from two different perspectives: the predominant perspective assumes that the problem of student dropout is mostly related to student and family circumstances difficult to overcome (Rumberger,1983); the other perspective suggests that the school itself may be a factor contributing to student dropout behavior (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). We take the latter perspective and explore how principals' perceptions of student dropout may influence the students' level of achievement and attitudes toward school.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As noted, much of the research on student dropout has used two analytical perspectives: the individual and the school

perspectives.[1] The individual perspective proposes that the student's personal characteristics are the major predictors of dropout behavior. Major research studies emphasizing this view include Bachman, Green and Wirtanen (1971); Children's Defense Fund, (1974); Combs and Cooley (1968); Ekstrom, Goetz, Pollack, and Rock (1986); Hoffer (1986); Pallas, (1984); Rumberger (1983); and Sherraden (1985). These studies suggest that socioeconomic and class variables are strong predictors of student dropout behavior. These students who are economically disadvantaged and come from lower social status are likely not to finish school. Students also tend to have negative attitudes about school and have lower grades and test scores.

Within the same individual perspective, another set of predictors include parental expectations and educational achievement, student expectations of academic achievement, parental support, number of student learning tools at home and parental involvement in school (Kim, 1985; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Gadwa and Griggs, 1985; Howell and Frese, 1982; and Wagner, 1984). In general, higher parental expectations of and involvement in schooling lead to lower dropout rates. Similarly, the higher the parents' educational level the lower the dropout behavior. Rumberger (1983) also suggests that family structure, size, and geographical location influences dropout behavior. Another factor that influences dropout behavior is lack of parental emphasis on the value of education.

Finally, another set of studies indicates that family stability and quality of parent-child relationships, peer group norms, and academic performance affect dropout behavior (Pallas, 1984; Mahan and Johnson, 1983; Rumberger, 1983; Fine, 1986; Kyle, 1984; Ekstrom at al, 1986; and Gadwa and Griggs, (1985). It appears that students suffering emotional problems at home (i.e., death in the family) and those from single-parent homes are more likely to leave school than those who have two-parent homes. Concerns about gangs, criminal behavior and personal safety also lead high school students to leave the school. Moreover, it appears that students' low performance in academic areas leads to negative attitudes and sagging interest in school that eventually result in dropping out of school.

Unlike the individual perspective, the school perspective posits that dropout behavior is not only influenced by the individual but by the school as well (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Wehlage and Rutter use student variables to measure school effects on student dropout concluding that weak adult authority, large school size, low expectations, and a dull curriculum contribute to student dropout. Bryk and Thum, on the other hand, suggest that absenteeism is less prevalent in schools where faculty are interested in and engaged with students and where there is an emphasis on academic work. Bryk and Thum (1989) also note that an orderly environment and less internal differentiation contribute to lower dropout. Of particular

interest is their finding that the same school characteristics--committed faculty, orderly environment, and academic emphasis--are associated with lower dropout behavior for students labeled "at risk."

Whether we take one perspective or the other, Caplan and Nelson (1983) suggest that how a problem is defined can determine if and how the problem will be addressed. Research which considers the student dropout problem is within schools assumes that social systems can influence children's behavior. For example, Bronfenbrenner (1979) views the child's development in relation to the environment. The child functions within several microsystems which influence the child, such as the family, community and school.

Neither the work of Wehlage and Rutter (1986) nor Bryk and Thum's (1989) school effects study considered the principal--a key figure in the school organizational context. Recent research on school effectiveness has pointed to the importance of the school principal in maintaining an orderly school environment, a school sense of mission, and high expectations both for the students and the faculty (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Deal & Peterson, 1989; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Murphy, 1986, 1989; Peterson & Martin, 1990). According to Bryk and Thum (1989) these variables also are associated with lower dropout behavior in schools. Thus, if the principal management of the school is directly related to effective schools, then his or her

perception of student dropout behavior must be related to whether the student wants to remain in school. In sum, our research builds on the work of Wehlage and Rutter and the work of Bryk and Thum by incorporating the views of the principal on dropout into our research model.

This study sought answers to two interrelated questions: how do principals define the factors (the problem, current practices, and solutions) that affect minority students' commitment to stay in school? Are there any relationships between the perceived context of the dropout problem and solutions, and certain student outcomes?

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

The conceptual framework guiding the analysis for the study is grounded in a model characterizing the relationships between the principal, teacher, and learner identified in the effective schools research. We apply this framework because of its utility in integrating and extending what we know about the context of organizational behavior at the macrolevel, and interactions which influence children at the microlevel of the classroom.

This framework identified in the effective schools literature emanates from a synthesis of systems theories and incorporates the research of effective schools and effective school leaders (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Hallinger and Murphy, 1986). Grounded in an interactive relationship rather than being unidirectional, the framework depicts how contextual

factors such as district and community characteristics may influence the instructional leadership behavior of principals as they, in turn shape the school culture (or school climate) and modify the instructional organization to affect student outcomes positively or negatively (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

METHODOLOGY

Design

The study was designed as a longitudinal multi-method, multisite (Firestone & Herriott, 1984) study based on archival (school records), primary (interview), and follow-up data sources. Five cities were selected for study. The selection criteria included: 1) the presence of significant Hispanic and Black school population in the city's schools, 2) ability to obtain timely access to schools, and 3) geographical representation from various regions of the country. Seven schools were selected and the principals were interviewed in depth for approximately two hours. Principals also responded to a questionnaire (see survey instrument section for more information).

Sampling and Data Sources

Data collection began in the 1986-87 school year and ended in the 1987-88 school year. Initially, five school districts

with substantial numbers of Latino students were selected to participate in the study. These were the cities of Chicago, Miami, Newark, Philadelphia, and San Antonio. Because of difficulties in obtaining access to a district, Milwaukee became the fifth site. The five cities selected for the study fell into three general population categories: cities in which one or two Hispanic groups tended to dominate (Miami and San Antonio); cities in which Blacks are still the predominant minority, but, in which there is also a single significant Hispanic population (Newark); and cities in which Blacks are still the most numerous minority, but where there is also a growing and more heterogeneous Hispanic population (Milwaukee and Chicago).

Eight schools participated in the study; we refer to the research sites as Marshall, Evers, Central, Francis, Johnson, Sparten, Sanders, and Eagle Junior High School (pseudonyms). The original sampling strategy called for selecting a stratified random sample of 110 Hispanic students from each school as well as a random sample of 100 students from other racial/ethnic groups in the same school (50 white and 50 black). The original goal was reasonably met in the case of Hispanic students, with 766 completed questionnaires. However, in some schools, less than 50 Black or White students were enrolled, and the resulting sample of Black and White students was smaller than expected.

All the schools provided archival records in a number of areas for each Hispanic student for both years of the study.

Unfortunately, the districts in our sample do not keep records that are entirely comparable to one another, which is typical of districts across the country. Thus, we have fairly complete data for only a limited number of variables, such as overall grades, grade point averages, and other achievement measures.

Three school districts provided data on both classes missed and number of days absent in the first semester of the ninth grade and the first semester of the tenth grade: Newark, Miami, and Chicago. Milwaukee could only provide the number of classes missed, while San Antonio could only provide the number of days absent. In addition, all schools provided data on grade retention, but this is a reliable indicator only for those students who have spent their entire educational careers in one school system.

Extraordinary efforts were made by the lead consultants in each city to locate students for the second-year follow up survey. For instance, in Milwaukee the lead consultant made 18 visits to the school site and an additional seven visits to other high schools into which students had transferred after the ninth grade. Other efforts included going to the students' homes, making phone calls, and mailing the instrument to other cities.

Instrumentation

Three sets of data were collected from principals: archival, personal interview, and school information. The archival data was a questionnaire completed by the principal and

focused on background information and their views on school climate including problems such as gangs and pregnancy. Items also included principals' perceptions of parental involvement. Second, an extensive personal interview was conducted with each principal. The questions were open-ended and ranged from specific questions about programs offered to potential dropout students to questions about gang/drug activities. Finally, a questionnaire on school information was also filled out by the principals. In this questionnaire factual information was collected including grade-by-grade enrollment, criteria for admitting students to schools, type of standardized testing, grading system, instructional time, student activities, and the background characteristics of the teaching staff.

Student outcome data focused on student attitudes and student achievement. This data were determined by obtaining overall scores of achievement (G.P.A. on a 4.0 scale) and attitudes (on a 30 point scale) within each site, and calculating the mean scores. Each student responded to a set of items concerning their attitudes about school, learning, and teachers. These sets of items were combined to form a score for each student; the highest score possible was 30 which meant a very positive attitude towards the school. the items were assessed for face, discriminating validity by a panel of experts, and through a pilot study. These scores were rank ordered for comparative purposes.

Data Analysis

To answer the first question concerning how principals perceive the dropout problem and solutions, we utilized the four stages of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of qualitative analysis within and across sites (Barton & Lazarsfeld, 1969). The first step in constant comparative analysis is searching the data for key issues and/or recurrent events which become categories for focus (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982), then comparing each response to these categories.

We completed an initial description of classes of data which constituted a concomitant first step in data reduction (Barton and Lazarsfeld, 1969) by rereading the interviews and focusing on the broad research question concerning the principals' perception of the contexts surrounding issues of student dropout. Categories or classifications of data which emerged were strategies currently in place for "at-risk" students, barriers to retention, and potential solutions to the dropout problem. In some of the sites, interview data were available from support services staff such as the school social worker or discipline officer. We used this interview data to corroborate the principals' responses.

Single Site Analysis. We paid specific attention to the principal's perceptions of the source of and solutions to the problem of student dropout. Within this overall context we searched for specific clues related to community (SES, peer

influence), school (teachers, academic climate), and students themselves (whether they were viewed as basically lazy or uncommitted). We arranged the responses to each research question in each site under the most appropriate component of the Far West Lab model: Community Context (subdivided into community and family), School Context (subdivided into school culture or instructional organization) and Student Context (specifically achievement and attitudes) for analytical purposes.

In some cases, it was difficult to discern whether a response was a part of the instructional organization or a characteristic of school culture. We coded these responses in a space on a diagram, between the instructional organization and the school culture. We recorded student outcome data (school level data for academic achievement and student attitudes) under the component of "Student Learning" for each research question in each site. We also coded selected demographic data to facilitate analysis and included the race and gender of the principal, the percentage of white, Hispanic, black, and other cultures in each school, and the size of the school.

Integrating categories and their properties is the second step of the constant comparative method. We wrote a descriptive case study of each site, which highlighted how principals defined the dropout problem, strategies currently in place to address student retention, and the contexts of their proposed solution to student dropout. To answer the second question related to

student achievement and attitudes, we then compared the principal's perceptions to the student outcome data in each site.

Cross-site Analysis. According to Yin (1984), Level three analysis includes questions asked of the findings across the entire cases. For the cross-site analysis we compared where principals placed the blame for student dropouts within our preliminary theoretical framework. Further, we highlighted themes which emerged across the sites, related to the various contexts associated with current practices and proposed solutions. We compared our qualitative findings to the student outcome data, across the sites, and searched for correlations and discrepancies between the principals perceptions and student outcomes. The fourth and final step in constant comparative analysis is then writing the suggested theories or propositions. We analyzed our preliminary framework and its heuristic power to explain our data; then we speculated on more comprehensive theories and propositions as suggested by the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We asked questions of the entire study calling on information beyond the multiple cases and comparing it to the literature and research we reviewed.

FINDINGS

Evers High School

The principal at Evers High School does not perceive the problem of school retention to be within the school or within

relationships between the school and community. This principal attributes the dropout problem to dropout symptoms within the student and the student's family. In blaming the student, the principal notes that the dropout problem is due to students lacking basic skills; being disruptive; having low expectations; not considering their future; cutting classes; having excessive absenteeism; arriving late; being bored, lazy, and uninterested in school; having a language deficit; and having no desire for achievement beyond the basic academic level.

The principal also defines the dropout problem within the students' families. For example, the principal suggests student dropout behavior is attributed to parental failure to discipline or control their children, parental pressure on students to work to provide family income, parental drug and alcohol abuse, and parental lack of fluency in English.

Evers High School provides many support services for those students considered "at risk". Support services include individual, group, and family counseling. The principal believes that building trust and good relationships with students is important, and that her best teachers are those who are "interested in kids, committed, and dedicated." Racial prejudice in this school receives a disciplinary warning, and school activities are conducted which are organized around the Hispanic and black culture. Current instructional practices to address student retention are limited. Activities specific to

instruction include after school tutoring. Connections with the community include home visits for truants and a cooperative counselor program with a local university. Student outcomes at Evers, places it third among the eight schools in both student achievement (G.P.A. 1.28) and student attitudes (16.03).

Most of the suggested solutions to the dropout problem are located within the school, but few are specifically related to curriculum or instruction. Rather, the solutions are found primarily in support services, such as improved counseling, recreational programs, and support groups. Suggestions related to the instructional organization include more small group learning, vocational training, intensive programs to develop student's basic skills and parenting skills, and the use of positive reinforcement. Although the principal acknowledges that the home and school must work together, she suggests the families need more crisis intervention.

Marshall High School

In Marshall High School, the principal perceived the problems of student retention in all three contexts: within the student, the school, and the community. Students are perceived as "lacking basic skills, and having insufficient knowledge of educational support." Within the school, the principal feels there is a lack of professional role models and that special classes remove students from the mainstream classes where they don't have the stimulus of accelerated peers. The principal also

acknowledges the community and family in defining the problem, in that students often have to work for family income and parents feel inadequate because of their own lack of education.

Within the school culture, students engaging in overt racial prejudice are not disciplined. However, many school events surrounding racial culture are held in the school. The principal has extensive contact with the students in the school, including hourly contact with students in halls, frequent classroom administrative visits, attendance at class meetings, and participation at sporting events, saying "[student contact is] a number one priority for me." Within the instructional organization, the school provides pregnant girls with curriculum in decision-making, child care, and parenting. The principal also believes that their highly individualistic/intensive programs are best for keeping students from dropping out.

Concerning community interaction, the school has numerous affiliations with community agencies. The principal also believes he has extensive knowledge of the lives of students when they are not in school, saying, "I make it a point to be apparent in the community and have ongoing feedback from community members." Student achievement in this school is last among the eight schools (1.28), while student attitudes are slightly higher (14.57) ranking fifth. The principal's suggestions for solutions to the retention problem lie solely in

the instructional organization--by providing smaller class sizes with more para-aide assistance.

Johnson High School

Unlike the principals at Marshall and Evers High School, this principal perceives that the dropout problem lies mainly within the instructional organization of the school, rather than within the child and the family. The principal explains: "The school has loose ends; resources are not available so children can participate in programs. It appears cumbersome. Sometimes there are not enough talented self-starters among staff. Sometimes staff are willing but funds get cut and programs suffer instability." Although the principal acknowledges disrupted family life, economic difficulties, gangs, and pregnancy as all contributing to the dropout problem, he also believes that the main reasons students drop out of school are "the failure of the school to address problems" and "school insensitivity: calling a kid a failure and prophecy fulfilling itself."

Johnson students who make overt remarks of racial prejudice are not disciplined. The school does hold many events surrounding the racial culture of the students. Counseling is provided, but additional services, not found in the other schools include a Rap Group focusing on racial cultures and an Introduction to Johnson High School course. Programs specific to the instructional organization abound and include extended day classes, juniors paid to tutor sophomores, and 25 students who

have paid office jobs within the school. Johnson ranks near the bottom of the eight schools (seventh) on G.P.A. (1.63) but student attitude is higher, ranking fourth among the schools (15.43).

The community connections with Johnson High School are quite strong. For example, the principal is selected by a community group, the United Neighborhood Organization successfully pressed the board and won approval for purchasing books, and a cooperative work training program for at risk sophomores provides work for pay as well as training in study habits and career counseling.

The Johnson High School principal believes that his students are sheltered from the "real world" and that one solution would be to integrate white students into his school. He explains, "Students should experience competition, especially from the white world to find out what its like in the 'outer world'. Many cannot see beyond the Latin community or get secure if they out compete black students. But when they confront the wider competition, they are shocked." This principal feels that students who "make it" are those "individuals who can rise above the economic difficulties and family problems." He goes on to note: "It's a mystery to me . . . maybe a sense of the value of education, maybe luck."

Also within the context of the school, a second solution is hiring more qualified staff. This principal is frustrated by

the fact that the district structure prevents him from selecting his own teachers. He laments, "I have a dream that I be allowed to select all Johnson High School teachers from a pool of superior teachers. Poor teachers are difficult to get rid of."

Central High School

This principal believes that the dropout problem lies primarily within the school, specifically with staff quantity and teacher quality. Although students "at risk" are identified, "there are not enough staff to do much about it." He believes that teachers are not taking over the role of guardian and that "teachers have to believe the child can make it and succeed and that [they] are the parent for these kids."

Within the school, racial prejudice is addressed through school detention, and many cultural events are held throughout the year. The principal believes in a racially diversified staff, and all of his department heads are black. The principal has a tighter control on instruction by requiring every course to have a syllabus which includes goals and expectations for students. The relationship between the community and the school is restricted to business partnerships, parent conferences, and computer phone contact to families when the student is late or truant. Central's student achievement is fifth among the schools (G.P.A. 1.84), while student attitudes at Central are the lowest among the eight (11.09).

Paralleling his belief that the problem lies within the school, the solutions to the problem are also within the purview of the school. Solutions to the problem for this principal lie in providing more counselors to meet the academic and personal needs of the students and adding a business manager to reduce his paperwork to enable him to be more involved with teachers and students. Specific instructional solutions include alternative programs, such as nonacademic schools for students who are not college bound. He explains:

> We need more opportunities for alternative programs for kids who are not successful. We are forced to keep behavior problem [students] and vandals in school or have them drop out or I have to suspend. This hurts all of our students. Non-academic schools are needed for manual skills for students who do not fit in. All students, regardless of academic ability, should be required to learn a trade.

Francis High School

This principal perceives the dropout problem both within the instructional organization and community context of the school. Like the principals of Central and Johnson High School, this principal believes it is the poor quality of his teachers, rather than the instructional practices of the school, which contributes most to the problem. Gangs and violence in the school shroud over significant problems of weak personnel within special

programs and teacher preparation and management. While acknowledging the school's contribution to student dropouts, this principal also places blame on community characteristics, such as conditions in the neighborhoods and the quality of the home environment for contributing to student dropout.

Racial prejudice within the school is addressed by counseling students, and many cultural events are held throughout the school year. Although the school provides special instruction through tutoring, peer tutoring, and support courses, its primary focus is on support services and programs, including cooperative counseling. This school has numerous partnerships with the community and the principal believes in an open door policy as long as it does not strain the school staff. Among the eight schools in the study, Francis High School ranks sixth on achievement (1.74 G.P.A.), but student attitudes are higher than the other schools (17.21) and place Francis second.

The Francis High School principal emphasizes the interconnection among the community, the school instruction and curriculum, and the school and home relationship for dropout solutions. It is clear for this principal that classroom interactions between teachers and students are of utmost importance and that solutions to the dropout problem should focus on working with the staff on the teaching and learning process to improve student outcomes. He wants prepared and organized teachers who can trigger the students' motivation to learn. The

emphasis on staff development would also be supported by a safe/relaxed atmosphere and more parent involvement. This principal believes in the strength of school/community relations, is opposed to bussing and in favor of the neighborhood school concept.

Sanders High School

The principal and support staff at Sanders locate the problem of student dropout primarily within the student and the students' family. Accordingly, dropout students are unfamiliar with the school culture and have no respect for the teachers. They also lack motivation, bonding with the environment, and awareness of and understanding of how the system works. Dropouts dislike classes, teachers, and the school.

Similarly, the principal focuses on perceived parental limitations. He says parents often lack parenting skills, a male figure in the home, and adequate income; therefore, the student must sometimes work. A truant officer says that "parents often try to put the responsibility on the school, and the school returns that responsibility to the parent." A social worker feels that "often the family is the source of the problem: lack of parenting skills, lack of a background or orientation to help children into the mainstream of society. Parents often don't know how to help the children succeed." The services currently coordinated with the community are also weak; for example, the social service agencies are overloaded with cases, and counselors

provided by one program have no coordination with the in-school counselors.

In contrast, one social worker defines the dropout problem within the school environment. He explains: "The schools do not have the funding or staff to make secondary school meaningful to everybody. The school inherits all of the individual and social problems of the society. The school is not given adequate resources to deal with these problems. Black students suffer from present and past effects of institutionalized racial prejudice. Self confidence is often eroded and there is a lack of clarity of personal goals, values, and expectations." This point is further illustrated in the way this school deals with racial prejudice.

Racial prejudice is not addressed but school events are organized around student culture. A strong counseling service rounds out programs supporting school climate. Within the instructional organization the school provides teachers as advisors, special tutoring before and after school, Saturday School Program, Adult Education Program, and many opportunities for students to work together on class assignments. Among the eight schools in the study, Sanders ranks first, both in student achievement (2.45 G.P.A.) and attitudes (19.05).

Despite the current approaches, the principal's primary solution to the dropout problem is upgrading the physical plant of the school. The support personnel feel the+'^I24^^ion is within the school, by providing more counselors and social

services. A discipline officer notes: "With additional resources, I would have lower class numbers to get more one to one situations with students and teachers and more counselors who understand the backgrounds from where these students come." The instructional organization is also addressed by the support personnel who suggest class size reductions to increase teacher/student interactions, tutoring, and intensive language services.

Sparten High School

For the principal at Sparten High School, the causes for student dropouts do not reside within any one context, but instead are dispersed among the student, community, and the school. For example, the principal feels teachers need to be more sympathetic, and "[students] start falling behind in studies at the elementary level, then they become discouraged. They can't cope with frustrations because they have never experienced success. Also, they have to become breadwinners for their families."

Within the school climate, racial prejudice is not addressed in this school, and no ethnic events are organized for the students. Instructionally, the school provides daily tutoring both before and after school and on Saturdays. The community/school interaction is confined to remedial classes at a local college, home visitations, and school/business partnerships. Student achievement (1.91 G.P.A.) places the

school fourth, while student attitudes (13.6) rank near the bottom (sixth) of the eight schools.

Paralleling the perceived context of the problem, the solutions to the dropout problem are relatively unfocused and include having more speakers from the community give presentations at the school, air conditioning the classrooms, and encouraging teachers to be more sympathetic and understanding.

Eagle Junior High

This principal blames the student and staff for student dropouts, stating the following: "a) they are not interested in anything they are involved in school, (b) they have been left back and are, therefore, older than the students in their classes, (c) they get pregnant, and (d) they are able to get jobs and earn money." This principal is also most frustrated by "working with teachers and staff who have tenure and are not performing up to the best of their ability."

Racial prejudice is not addressed in this school, although ethnic events are held throughout the year. This junior high principal feels that the strength of the school is good rapport between staff and students. However, he notes, "we need to improve our ability to communicate the importance of school to our students." Students "at risk" who do not drop out of Eagle Junior High are interested in an academic area, experience some kind of success in school, and are seen as achievers in some way. This principal feels that "if students are not involved in

something they like or are interested in, they will not graduate. Instructionally, a comprehensive tracking system is in place, which divides these junior high students into a compensatory, basic skills, and college preparatory program. Community interaction is limited to several programs coordinated with community agencies. The school places second on student achievement (2.33 G.P.A.), however, student attitudes rank seventh among all the schools (12.40).

For this principal, the solutions to the problem all lie within the instructional organization of the school and include having smaller classes, adding elective courses, expanding vocational education, and recruiting more Hispanic teachers. Although he advocates for increasing the number of Hispanic teachers, the principal does not believe racial and ethnic balance is an issue. He explains: "The more important factor is getting qualified and competent high school teachers who care. Good teachers who care about students will be effective with all students, no matter their race or ethnicity."

Cross-Site Findings

Problem Context. The context of issues mitigating against student retention range from within the school to placing blame on the student, family, and community. Two of the principals locate the problem of student dropouts within the student and family. Only two of the principals hold the school solely accountable for the dropout problem.

The principals who blame the school and the instructional program for the problem of student dropout conceptualize the problem as an internal matter and say that staff as well the lack of smaller class sizes are the primary factors associated with student disengagement in the school. It is these same schools which report the lowest levels of student achievement and attitudes toward the school.

The attitudes and achievement levels of students, however, seem to be unrelated to how the principal perceives the context of the student dropout problem. For example, in one school where the principal blames the student and family for dropout problems, the student achievement and attitudes are the highest among all the schools studied. The principals who do blame the student and family tend to pay attention to support services as ways to solve the problem. For example, these principals spoke of the need to hire more counselors, social workers, psychologists, and security officials.

Regardless of how principals define the dropout problem, they all agree that students are the most rewarding aspect of their work. For example, one principal explains, "This is the most interesting school in [the city] and we have a tremendous resiliency among the students in the face of many problems. It's rewarding to work with good kids. I want the best for them. Thirty years from now . . . the Latino culture will be part of this culture, and hopefully, I will have made a contribution to

speed a better life. They'll get it: political power, economics, all of it. To help students in that role is important." And another notes: "You get angry. But you become proud of test scores and achievements, and scholarships. The best part of the day is talking with kids in the halls."

Context of current practices. All the principals cite programs and strategies related specifically to school climate which support the students personally and with future work, such as personal counseling and career counseling. Three of the principals discipline students for overt displays of racial prejudice. All but one school host cultural events for the students.

Within the instructional organization, all the schools provide specific programs and practices for students identified as "at risk" for dropping out. Some of the schools include alternatives to the college preparatory curriculum, including vocational training and parenting classes. In addition, all of the principals cite inherent weaknesses in the special programs provided for "at-risk" students (such as bilingual education and remedial math). One principal believes that "pull-out" models of instruction remove students from the mainstream classes and from the stimulus of accelerated peers. Another principal labels these classes "an administrative nightmare," and goes on to explain, "Space is short. It is difficult to provide for the needs of all programs." This principal is most frustrated, not

by the students, but by "the immensity of the monster I have created. Special programs abound, creating programming madness."

Another principal believes that students need "total immersion in the regular program with bilingual teachers serving as resource teachers" rather than being pulled out of classes for ESL training. The junior high principal asserts, "the main drawback is that students then have no room in their schedules for electives. Without the electives, they are left with programs that lack the interests of the students. There are no areas of study in their schedules that they enjoy and would probably excel in." All the principals describe cooperative projects with various agencies in the community, and all include strategies for working with parents.

Solution context. The focus of most of the proposed solutions to the problem of student dropouts is within the school, with less emphasis on school/community relations. Some of the principals emphasize changes in the instructional services and teaching staff while others seek increases in support services for students.

Even though the ethnic background of the principal seems to be unrelated to their perception of the context where the problem of dropout exists, ethnicity did seem to be related to the solutions posed by the principals. The black and Hispanic principals tend to include some aspect of community relations in

their strategies, whereas the white principals focus on processes within the school without attention to the community.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study may inform the theoretical utility of the Bossert et al. model for understanding how principals' perceptions of student dropout may influence student achievement and attitudes. Its main objective is to explain, at the macrolevel, the stability or instability of a school as a system and to demonstrate its direct relationship to student outcomes. This systems model depicts the interactive relationships between the community, the school, and the students. Absent in this model, however, is a key variable that describes the microlevel of such relationships--power relations.

The concept of power relations is emphasized in Cummins' (1986) model for empowering minority students. Cummins' work combined with Bossert's model can help expand the heuristic power of the model to explain the administrator's role with nondominant groups. Cummins' model focuses on three kinds of interactions or power relations: (1) between teachers and students, (2) between schools and underrepresented groups who live in communities, and (3) "the intergroup power relations within society as a whole" (p. 19). According to Cummins (1986), interactions between students and educators can be mediated by the covert or overt role educators take in relation to four aspects of schools: the incorporation of language and culture in the school program,

inclusion of minority communities in the education of their children, pedagogy that encourages self-directed learning, and assessment practices.

Cummins' model also assumes that "the social organization and bureaucratic constraints within the school reflect not only broader policy and societal factors but also the extent to which individual educators accept or challenge the social organization of the school in relation to minority students and communities" (p. 19). Within this framework the educational failure of minority students is analyzed "as a function of the extent to which schools reflect or counteract the power relations that exist within the broader society" (p. 32). According to Cummins, racially diverse students do not fail when they are "positively oriented towards both their own and the dominant culture, that do not perceive themselves as inferior to the dominant group, and are not alienated from their own cultural values" (p.22).

We can apply the concept of power relations in the three contexts of Bossert's model which parallel the arenas of power exchange in Cummins' model: the student and school, the community, and the broader relationship to the distribution of power in society (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

When Cummins' model is juxtaposed with the Far West Lab model, power relations within the school and in the school's association with its community and the broader society may shape the principal's leadership behavior and how the principal interacts with the community and students. Power relations also may influence the way teachers relate to students, thus impacting--positively or negatively--on student outcomes. We reported that student outcomes were unrelated to how the principal perceives the context of the dropout problem. It is significant to note, however, that none of the principals attributed the problem to intergroup power relations within society as a whole. Could the low student achievement and poor student attitudes be a result of students feeling inferior to the dominant group and alienated from their own cultural values? A closer examination of the findings from a power relations perspective suggests this may be true.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address an alternative model, and we thoroughly present this argument elsewhere (see Capper & Reyes, 1990). We will, however, briefly provide some examples from the data in relation to this revised model.

First, concerning school climate, it is significant to note how the principals do not address the issue of racial prejudice. Nearly all the principals acknowledge that students who voice or display racial slurs are not disciplined or counseled. By

ignoring overt displays of oppression, the principals legitimize (Anderson, 1990) the unequal power relations for racially diverse students. Although all the schools, except one, conduct special events to address racial diversity in the school, these events can serve as an attempt to mask the underlying power inequities.

Instructionally, none of the principals consider the cultural relevance of the curriculum when they place the context of the problem within the school. While a few of the principals include solutions which are more vocationally relevant, cultural relevance is ignored. Also, while the Far West Lab model disengages the school culture from the instructional organization, research on schooling for racially diverse students indicates that it may be more prudent to consider these school processes as synergistic. Cummins notes,

> for minority students who have traditionally experienced school failure, there is sufficient overlap in the impact of cognitive/academic and identity factors to justify incorporating these two dimensions within the notion of 'empowerment," while recognizing that under some conditions each dimension may be affected in different ways (p. 23) (see Figure 2).

Finally, community relations are confined primarily to arrangements with businesses, community colleges, and community agencies to confront the so-called "problem students" and their parents. Community members other than power elites have no direct

communication with principals, thus giving the principals a great deal of power in dealing with school related issues. The principals stand at the center of school power where they contain the community through external agencies (community-based organizations). By doing this, the principals can disengage the community from critical issues such as curriculum content or instructional organization. Although two of the principals acknowledge their personal contact with the community and organized parent groups, none of these principals refers to the community influence on the climate or instruction of the school, or the school's power relation with the community. This finding may explain why lower socioeconomic communities are less likely to assert political leverage on principal behaviors (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Rosenholtz, 1985).

IMPLICATIONS

Despite the limitations of this investigation, this study can provide tentative suggestions for practice and direction for further research. The findings can imply that if principals care about the educational success of racially diverse students, then they must begin to dismantle the unequal power relations inherent in the interactions within the school and with the community.

Supporting cultural identity must extend beyond ethnic events. Principals need to be sensitized to the seriousness of ignoring overt displays of racial prejudice and its affects on all persons in the school. Principals must reconsider their

understanding of school "culture" which should include practices that are not limited to orderly environments, high expectations for student achievement, and support services. Reorienting the notion of school climate back to its anthropological roots in legitimizing diverse cultures is necessary (see Cummins, 1986; Erickson, 1987; Moll & Diaz, 1987; Sleeter & Grant, 1987).

Principals need to shape the content and process of instruction around the experiences of their students and address cultural relevance in all aspects of student learning. For example, principals could structure the content of the instruction around the students' immediate reality as well as address its future relevance (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Basic skills, higher order thinking, and vocational training need not be neglected in these practices. Rather, curriculum and instruction which is meaningful to students enhances their knowledge acquisition and promotes cultural identity.

Principals cannot develop school climate and an instructional organization which promotes student empowerment by isolating the school from the community. Formal relationships with community organizations and businesses may not provide avenues for clearly understanding the context of the student culture. Students must see community persons involved in shaping the instructional content of the school. When community persons are involved, students will know that their culture is valued by persons in power. This community involvement provides personal

images for students to aspire to goals dependent on a high school diploma (Cummins, 1986). Therefore, principals ought to consider deconstructing current power structures with the community to enable full participation within the school context, beyond typical school/community practices (i.e., school/business partnerships and community college collaboration).

Also, the results of this study indicate the need for further research. First, research on student retention needs to include schools and communities in a range of socioeconomic classes for comparative purposes. The schools included in this project are urban with a high density of lower socioeconomic status persons. Second, researchers need to analyze the specific content of instruction and services in these schools to determine if they are culturally relevant and responsive to the students and the community. The programs could be subjected to the analytical scrutiny of the typology presented by Sleeter and Grant (1987) on multicultural education. A third study may explore the specific degree to which community members are empowered to participate in the life of the school, and to influence specifically the curriculum and instruction. Fourth, research also needs to analyze further how school climate and instructional organization mutually inform the other when providing a relevant school experience for all students, regardless of "difference." Finally, we need to understand the rela-

tionship between such an empowerment model, and its affect on student outcomes.

The late Ron Edmonds (1979), made clear what was missing in education is political will, not knowledge:

> We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't done it so far (p. 29).

We have the knowledge to counteract dominant/dominated group relations with racially diverse students. The perceptions of school principals, and their accompanying silence or actions can serve to legitimate or deconstruct these relationships.

Notes

1. For a thorough review of dropout statistics see Arias, 1986; McCarty & Burdiago-Valdez, 1985; Reyes & Capper, 1990; Rumberger, 1987.

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Figure Caption

Figure 1. Bossert's instructional management framework.

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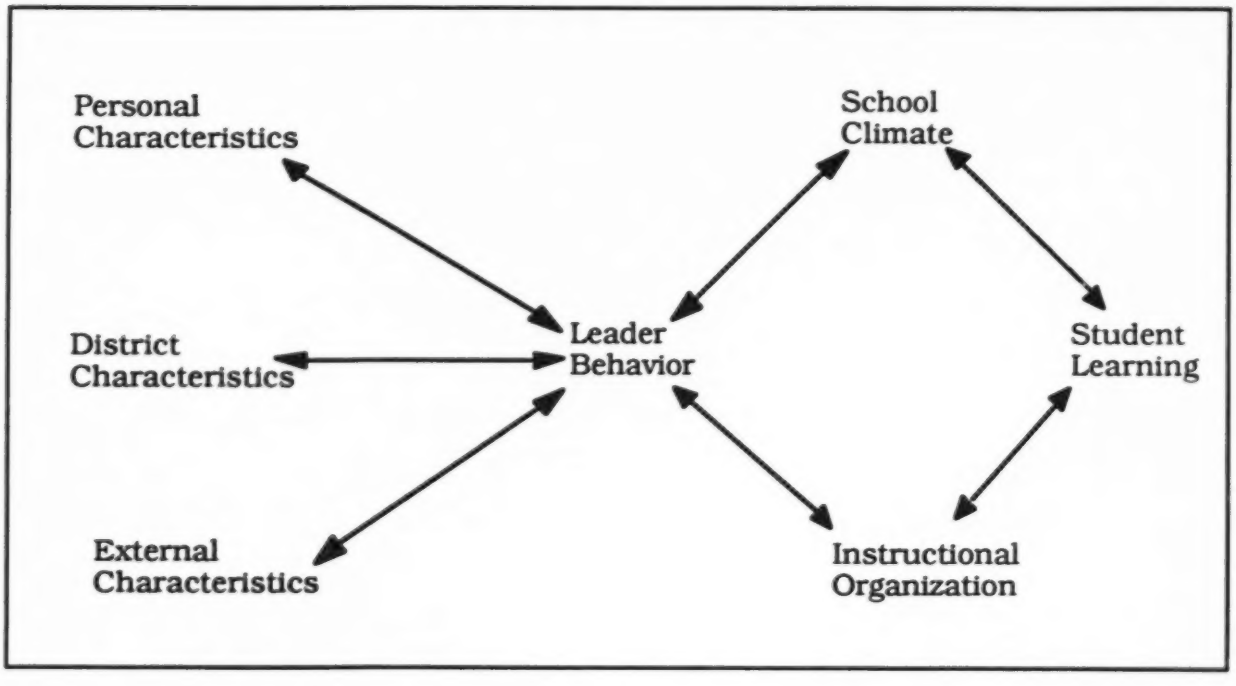

Figure Caption

Figure 2. An intergroup power-relations model for leadership.

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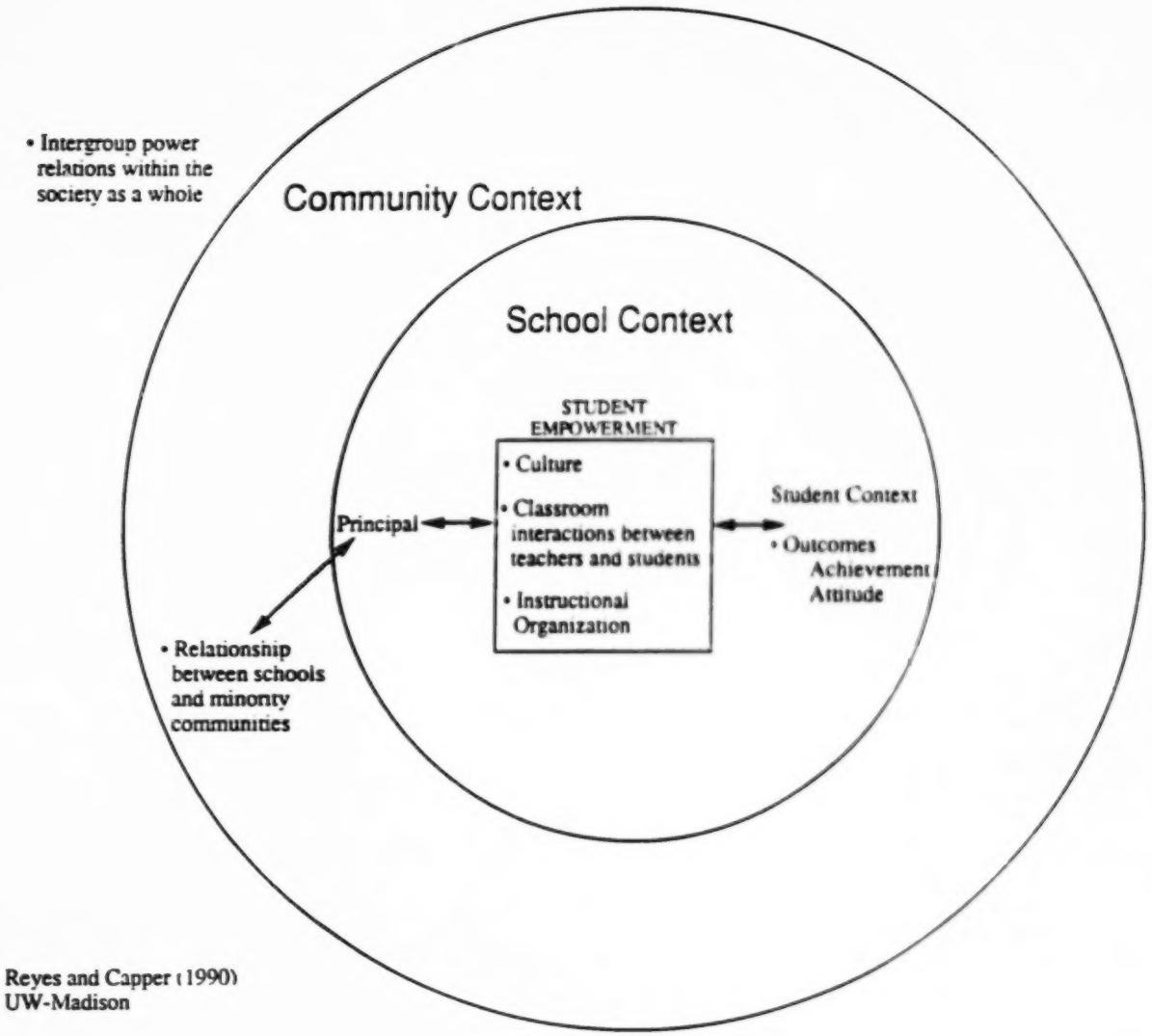
Figure 2. An Intergroup Power-relations Model for Leadership



Reyes and Capper (1990)
UW-Madison